**TLI Grant Report—English 202 C — Technical Writing (2015)**

**Submitted by Terry Baker**

**Introduction**

Throughout my forty years of teaching, I have always embraced new pedagogical theories and technologies as a way to stay current and to challenge myself to create meaningful classes that students enjoy and find valuable.

Given the opportunity and incentive (the TLI grant), I undertook the challenge of transforming my technical writing face-to-face class into a fully online course. As my students have always given my class and me very positive evaluations, I wanted to find out whether such results could be achieved in an online only class—without the strength of my in-class persona.

**Project Design**

Early in March, I met with the Center for Teaching and Learning staff (Daonian Liu, Amy Roche, and Mary Ann Mengel) to discuss my grant, the timeline for completing this grant, and a basic framework to follow**.**

Following that meeting, I met with Amy, my project manager, and we identified these immediate goals:

* Finding and adopting a suitable textbook (I hadn’t been using one for the last few years, relying instead on resources I created, collected, and distributed to students). After reviewing several, I chose *Technical Communication Fundamentals*, by William Pfeiffer and Kaye Adkins, to supplement my own resources.
* Choosing a template for ANGEL. I chose a straightforward example, built around the heading “What to Do and When to Do it.”
* Reviewing similar courses created by other Penn State instructors.
* Identifying and enumerating my instructional goals and adapting them for online delivery.
* Enrolling and completing the May session of OL 2000: Effective Online Teaching.
* Learning and experimenting with software and hardware needed to achieve those goals. These included the following:
  + ANGEL—which I’ve used before, but without using all the tools available which could improve a fully online class.
  + Screencast-o-matic—to create videos to introduce each unit and instructions for showing how to perform certain tasks, such as forwarding ANGEL email and grouping items in MS Word.
  + YouTube—for uploading videos and creating captions to make them fully accessible by everyone.
  + Turnitin—Peer Mark for students to peer review each other’s documents and Grade Mark for submitting documents online for grading.
  + SWIVL—to capture lectures on video. I received a grant for this as well, but after meeting with Mary Ann Mengel, I chose not to use this hardware/software.
  + Voice Thread, which I chose not to use, as it did not provide any specific tools that I couldn’t achieve otherwise.

Throughout the summer, I created the course content, and with the help of Amy and her intern Erik Lewis, made it all accessible. We set up the ANGEL Gradebook and tied all assignments to it. By the end of the summer, the course was fully developed and launched for 3 sections with a total of 72 students.

**Learning** **Outcomes**

I was very pleased by the outcomes achieved at the end of the semester.

For my part, I can make these observations, based on my experience and on comments students provided in person:

* My grade distribution remained relatively the same as in previous face-to-face classes. I expected to see a slight decline, but that didn’t happen.
* I had more students attend office hours than when I had face-to-face classes. I attribute this to several things: I encouraged them to visit before deadlines for a personal review of their rough drafts; I offered advice and clarification on choosing topics and working collaboratively; and I enticed them with offers of free coffee and chocolate. It paid off.
* A number of students told me the class felt remarkably like a face-to-face class, thanks to the many videos I made, the frequent email contact, and my accessibility—both in my office and online.
* My SRTE scores were very comparable to scores in my face-to-face technical writing classes in spring 2016. The quality of the course went down .08%. The quality of the instructor went down .14%. These numbers are well within the typical fluctuations from one semester to another.

With Amy’s help, I conducted a mid-semester anonymous survey as well as one at the end of the semester. Some of the most important results of those surveys can be found in the tables below. (NOTE: I’ve included only those questions which were most relevant to assessing my stated goals.) Each line represents the responses I received from each of my three sections, listed in percents.

Table 1:

| Response to… | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Not Applicable |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ANGEL agendas (weekly schedules) are easily understood and helpful in meeting deadlines. | 72.2  40  44.4 | 22.2  50  44.4 | 0  0  5.6 | 0  10  5.6 | 5.6  0  0 | 0  0  0 |
| Textbook readings are valuable and useful in helping me understand technical writing conventions. | 16.7  20  11.1 | 38.9  40  33.3 | 16.7  25  38.9 | 16.7  10  11.1 | 11.1  5  5.6 | 0  0  0 |
| Instructor’s videos and screencasts are interesting and valuable. | 50  20  33.3 | 22.2  65  50 | 22.2  10  16.7 | 0  0  0 | 5.6  0  0 | 0  5  0 |
| Readings not from the textbook are valuable and useful in helping understand technical writing conventions. | 38.9  25  27.8 | 38.9  40  55.6 | 16.7  20  16.7 | 5.6  10  0 | 0  5  0 | 0  0  0 |
| The instructor responds to email in a timely manner. | 72.2  65  77.8 | 22.2  30  16.7 | 5.6  0  0 | 0  0  0 | 0  0  0 | 0  5  5.6 |
| Examples of student-written model documents are valuable and useful. | 72.2  70  94.4 | 22.2  25  5.6 | 5.6  5  0 | 0  0  0 | 0  0  0 | 0  0  0 |
| Course materials and homework assignments are improving my technical writing skills. | 44.4  30  33.3 | 38.9  60  44.4 | 0  10  22.2 | 11.1  0  0 | 5.6  0  0 | 0  0  0 |

Table 2:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Response to… | Very Heavy | Heavy | About the Same | Light | Very Light | Not Applicable |
| The workload in this 3-credit course relative to other courses (face-to-face or online) is… | 0  5  5.6 | 16.7  15  11.1 | 72.2  65  77.8 | 5.6  5  5.6 | 0  0  0 | 5.6  5  0 |

**Discussion**

After completion of this semester, I plan to make the following changes for the three sections I will have in spring 2016:

* I will no longer use Turnitin. It was too complex in terms of required settings on my part, and many students needed help mastering the interface. Both my students and I wasted too much time trying to get Peer Mark to work as we wanted it to. This semester, I will use Box for peer review, which Mary Ann helped me set up. And going forward, Amy and Mary Ann tell me Canvas will allow for a more robust peer review function, something I eagerly look forward to.
* Perhaps the area of most concern to students was the value of the textbook (see Table 1 above). I’m not a big fan of textbooks myself, and I will make it more of an additional resource and will rely more on the ones I make and collect, which students find more valuable (see Table 1 above).
* “Simplify, simplify,” Henry David Thoreau so wisely advised. I did just that as the semester progressed and will do so again for the spring.
* Consistent due dates—and the clear “What to Do and When to Do it” guidance—helped even the least disciplined students consistently meet deadlines.
* I learned that you can’t simply put your face-to-face class onto the Web. Though all my goals remained the same, altering materials is sometimes necessary for teaching in an online environment.
* Inform the registrar’s office if you plan the course specifically for Berks students, as I did. Several students from around the state joined the class late, which caused a variety of problems, including these: the textbook was not available in their bookstore or campus library; collaborative projects that required students to meet face-to-face were impossible to complete; and the extra incentives I provided to come to my office hours were not available to them. Also, if you teach a class which typically has 25 students but the enrollment limit is 50, you could find yourself with a much larger class. These potential problems can be avoided if you notify the registrar to restrict the enrollment to Berks students.

**Conclusion**

Though I knew that creating an online class would require a lot of work before the semester began, I underestimated, of course, just how time-consuming it was to do it well. But I found that the lessons I learned through this project made it much easier and quicker to design another online class. In spring 2016, I am teaching a course I never taught before—Writing for the Web. And I was able to create a hybrid class (which will be Web only next year) in much less time.

As I stated previously, I wanted to find out whether I could achieve good results in an online only class—without the strength of my in-class persona. In short, I feel I did. And my students validated that conclusion in their anonymous survey responses and SRTE’s. I couldn’t be happier. And though I have much to refine going forward, I succeeded in adopting new pedagogical theories and technologies to create a meaningful class that students enjoy and find valuable.

**Acknowledgements**

I cannot emphasize enough the valuable guidance and contributions that Amy Roche and Mary Ann Mengel made in carrying out this grant. They were so helpful and always available whenever and however I needed them. Without them, this endeavor would have turned out quite differently—and not in a good way. And their continued help even after the implementation semester ended has been invaluable as well. Many thanks to them—and to Penn State Berks administration—for this opportunity!